

EVALUATING THE EXPERIENCE OF STUDENTS AS ACTORS IN A PEOPLE INTENSIVE SERVICE DELIVERY SYSTEM

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Abstract

South Africa's higher education landscape has gone through some turbulent waters of late. Students play a fundamental role in this intensive university service delivery system. This study's aim was to evaluate students' needs, frustrations, challenges, experiences and emotions as actors within a people intensive higher education service delivery system. It places the student as the center of the service design approach and highlights several areas of exploration wherein students are actors within the system. The study adopted a qualitative approach. Several group interviews were conducted with students. The collected data was analysed using an inductive content analysis approach. The main results indicated that overall the students' experience and emotions are positive, albeit a few areas of improvement is needed. Students need extra attention during their first year of study and some of the service departments need improvement. The contributions of this study are on the practical implementation of an improved service design and eliminating these service gaps.

Keywords: Students, South Africa, Service design, Systems theory, Higher Education.

1. INTRODUCTION

Students form a cardinal part of a university and can be described as one of the main actors in the university service system (Bassi, 2019). Compared to Western Universities, South African Universities however face different challenges in serving student needs (Dell, 2018). Originating from an imperial past (Strydom, 2016) - South Africa's very first university being modelled on the University of London (Carruthers, 2018), South African Universities have evolved a lot over time, and are very different from their Western origins and more transformed compared to the start of 1994 (Bunting, 2002). With this evolvement and transformation, new opportunities and hurdles have surfaced. With reference to students, South African universities face distinctive challenges (Dell, 2018), especially when compared to its Western colleagues in terms of servicing students. South African universities therefore require alternative approaches and thinking to address these challenges and to manage the success of its students.

The most prevalent challenge across universities in South Africa is funding. According to the Minister of Education, students with inadequate funding face issues such as food security, accommodation and obtaining textbooks. Most of these students tend to be poor black working-class students, and these issues require unique funding models. Government initiatives such as the Department of Higher Education and training (DHET) bursary scheme (NSFAS) is however addressing these issues by providing adequate funding for the latter aspects, but only to those students coming from a household income of below R350 000 per year. The success of these funding models however remains to be determined and will only be confirmed after a longitudinal analysis has been concluded in the coming years (Dell, 2018).

As both intellectual and social contributors and constituents of societies (Strydom, 2016), South African Universities have a duty to shape its students in order to contribute to the broader society's wellbeing. In achieving this objective, universities are faced with challenges in the form of student pass rates and throughput rates and providing additional academic support to struggling students, all whilst still ensuring that students obtain quality degrees. These challenges place a lot of strain on universities and require innovative methods, unique to the South African context, to manage and solve. The Minister of Education called on universities to take responsibility for students' success and argues that this can only be achieved by understanding the students' needs (Dell, 2018).

In addressing this call by the Minister of Education, this paper aims to uncover student problems and challenges in a South African context and to review possibilities for improvement. The paper is specifically positioned in a service design thinking and systems theory approach, and therefore places the student at the center of the service design process. It aims to explore and uncover students' needs, frustrations, challenges, experiences and emotions as actors within a people intensive, higher education service delivery

system. Serving as a first step to uncovering and understanding these problems, this paper commences with undergraduate business students' perspectives at one university and specifically explores:

- Undergraduate students' experience of studying at a HEI (higher education institution)
- Undergraduate students' emotions experienced as actors within a university system
- Potential service gaps in students' experiences as key service receivers in a university system

The paper initiates with a literature review detailing the South African higher education context and discusses university as well as student challenges. This is followed by an explanation of universities as large interconnected systems and the application of service design thinking to understand and design services. The nature of the paper's objectives called for a qualitative research approach, which is detailed in the methodology section. This is followed by a discussion of the results, findings, managerial implications, limitations and avenues for future research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review section endeavours to place the students as actors in the middle of an intensive service delivery system. The key research issues addressed in the literature review involve the following:

- South African higher education
- Universities as systems
- Service design

2.1 South African Higher Education

The global drive to gain access to higher education, has among others, been fueled by the likes of economists such as Thomas Piketty. He advocates for the need for social investment in higher education institutions, in particular, as an important method to address problems of highly unequal societies (Hornsby, 2015). South Africa is home to one of the most unequal societies in the world (Baker, 2019), and unlike its Northern (USA and Europe) or often referred to as Western world counterparts, faces a unique set of challenges. Core-periphery relations is a concept that originates from world-systems analysis and dependency theory, and this concept suggests that countries such as South Africa fall into the periphery classification as a developing country in the global south, whereas the core is represented by the developed countries (USA, Europe). This division not only refers to a geographical one, but to the developed countries representing the ideas, knowledge, culture and resolutions for modernity, and being privileged over those countries lying in the periphery (Nkomo, 2015). This notion and thinking have been strongly opposed in recent years in South Africa, and this opposition was evident with the Rhodes must fall movement that started at the University of Cape Town (Njamnjoh, 2015).

South Africa is also faced with a complicated past of an Apartheid heritage - today trying to recover from Apartheid's various institutionalised practices (Nkomo, 2015). One such initiative to overcome the division between previous racial divisions at universities included the merging of several previously disadvantaged universities with previously advantaged universities. This reduced the number of universities in South Africa from 36 to 23 (and later 26 with the establishment of three new universities) (Davids & Waghid, 2016). Even after the mergers, transformation is still an ongoing process. One example of some of the more recent challenges include the need to transform university senates, a structure originating from a UK practice, which due to the nature of the country's history is still described as consisting of predominantly white professors, with limited representation of the broader university student and staff make-up (Hornsby, 2015). Another challenge is that of student access due to funding. In October 2015, despite related protests having happened in earlier years at previously disadvantaged universities, the fees must fall protests arose, this time at predominantly previously advantaged universities. It is argued that these protests gained more attention and media coverage, compared to any past efforts to oppose fee increases and challenges, because they originated from previously advantaged universities (Davids & Whaghid, 2016). These protests eventually resulted in the South African government not increasing university fees for the following year, as well as the later announcement of fully funded education for those individuals having a household income less than R350 000 per year (Dell, 2018).

Universities are intellectual as well as social institutions, and therefore acts as not only contributors of knowledge in society, but also important constituents of society (Strydom, 2016:58). Scholars also argue

that there is a strong link between a country's assigned designation by the World Bank's classification of a country's income levels, and its higher education priorities. This suggests that higher education institutions have a more critical mission and are the engines responsible for local and national knowledge development. All of these aspects are seen in South Africa, whilst grappling with economic, political and social transitions (Nkomo, 2015). South African universities therefore have a large responsibility. They need to manage the pressure of transformation, generate new knowledge, provide quality education, support a large portion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds to adapt to their environments and successfully achieve their qualifications, manage throughput and pass rates, and recover from the wounds of colonialism through a focus on incorporating indigenous knowledge in its curriculums. (Davis & Waghid, 2016; Dell, 2018; Nkomo, 2015; Strydom, 2016).

The demand for higher education and therefore the number of student enrolments is already increasing at universities and is expected to increase substantially in future due to the growing and changing societal needs (Nkomo, 2015; Mabelebele, 2015; Mushemeza, 2016; Malele, 2011). This suggests the importance of a focus on student experience and the supplying of quality education to a set of diverse and growing number of students at South African higher education institutions. Universities are however large and complicated structures. It is therefore important to start at the beginning, by gaining an understanding of the functioning of universities, and to appreciate their large and complex systems. This means dissecting their workings piece by piece in order to move towards improving their functioning as large organisations of interconnected components that act as engines for societal change and upliftment.

2.2 Universities as systems

Popularly labelled as "systems theory", Niklas Luhmann, the German sociologist and founder of the theory, argues that social systems exist to reduce the complexities of human action. He contends that social systems are so complicated that they cannot function if not reduced into systematic components that interact with one another – otherwise there would be an infinite number of possibilities of events (Albert, 2016; Valentinov, 2013). All areas in a system therefore function in a synergistic and interdependent manner (Ingram, 2018). Over the years, systems theory has become widely applied in different fields, ranging from politics, art, religions, law and even sub-fields such as business management (Gerim, 2017). In the context of an organisation such as a university, this system is similarly composed of complicated and integrated sub-systems that work together to achieve effectiveness and efficiency. Systems theory in this instance can therefore aid in describing this interaction that takes place both within a university and between a university and its larger environment as an input and output relationship (Mofokeng, 2002).

This paper applies the notion of a systems theory approach in order to illuminate the role of specifically the student as having become an important and critical component in South African universities. The role of the student is isolated in this study, but in addition also explored against the background of the numerous sub-components and parts in the system that the students are exposed to, thereby improving the understanding of what affects and influences them. The student component in the university system further plays an important role, in terms of managing the reciprocal impact that their experiences have back into the societies served by the universities. Universities however remain service providers, and to understand the role of the student as best possible, a further approach is taken by positioning the paper in a service design perspective. This orientation further allows for the placement of the student at the centre of the process and to uncover their challenges and frustrations as they progress and function within the system.

2.3 Service Design

Service design is rooted in the application of unique and creative ways of working when improving or developing people-intensive service systems. It is also highly focused on uncovering and understanding the different interactions that occur between various stakeholders during service consumption (Segelström, 2013). By reviewing these interactions, a service design approach thereby attempts to gain a holistic understanding of the entire customer experience as the service is received and consumed (Wetter-Edman, 2011). Service design further fundamentally relies on design thinking in the service context. In design thinking, designers frame problems and opportunities from a human-centered perspective by using visual methods to explore and generate ideas and to engage potential users and stakeholders (e.g., Brown 2008; Ojasalo & Ojasalo, 2015). Designing can be understood as designers co-creating problems and solutions in an exploratory and iterative process in which problems and solutions co-evolve (Cross 2006; Dorst & Cross 2001). Stakeholder experience is one of the central areas of development in the service sector and is at the

core of design thinking as it relies on co-creation of value within the service environment (Patricio, Fisk, Falcao Cunha & Constantine, 2011; Liedtka & Ogilvie, 2011). Therefore, understanding the stakeholder and specifically, customer experience during the service design, is paramount. This is accomplished iteratively through insight gained by involving stakeholders.

To summarize, Stickdorn (2011) explains that service design consists of five principles:

- It is user centered; the customer therefore forms an integral part of the process.
- It should be a co-creative environment; customers as well as any other stakeholders are involved, thereby ensuring that everyone's needs are met.
- A service should be split up into sequences of events in order to understand each aspect, touchpoint, experience and interactions that happen during the service.
- Evidence suggests that customers should obtain something tangible to remind them of the service encounter.
- Holistic thinking refers to the fact that the entire grand design should be seen as a whole, in order to experience how and whether everything fits together in the end, and to identify whether all sequences fit together correctly.

Summarizing the literature review, South Africa's past, the merging of several higher education institutions and the student unrest of recent years, has put a spotlight on universities, and specifically students' challenges and experiences. Universities are big complex social systems wherein students are role-players or actors. Using a service design and systems theory approach, the role that the students play within this complexity is evaluated, in order to better understand students' role in this complex system. The methodology section, detailing the approach taken in order to sample and collect data from the students, as well as the data analysis approach is presented in the following section.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study made use of an independent research agency to collect the data via group interviews. This data was recorded, transcribed and analysed through inductive content analysis. Inductive content analysis is utilised in cases where there are limited studies on the phenomenon under investigation, and the coded texts are derived directly from the text (Vaismoradi, Turunen & Bondas 2013:398). In this study, the text used for coding was the transcription of the group interviews.

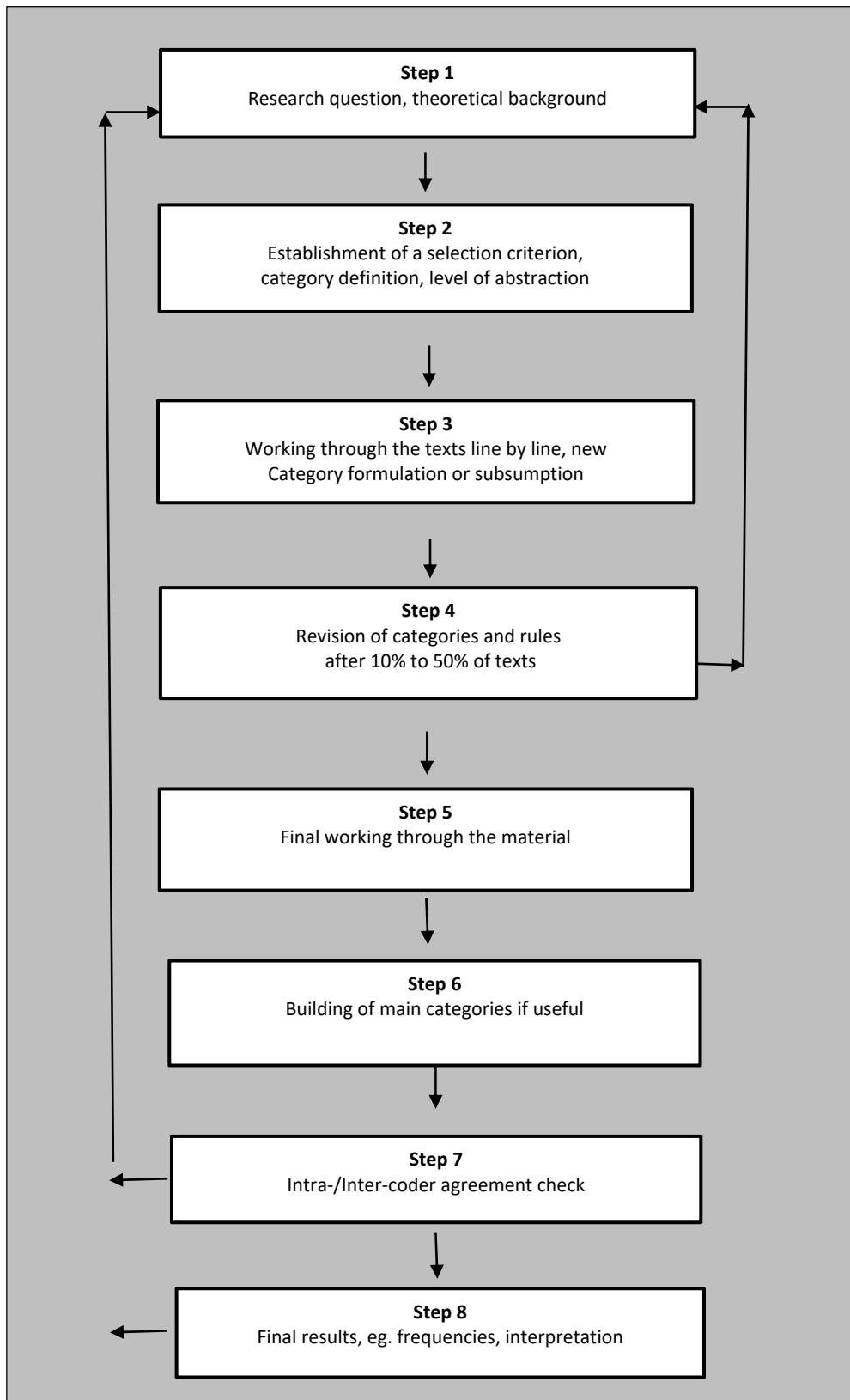
3.1 Target group and sample decision

The study applied a non-probability convenience sampling approach. Announcements were placed on the university's Blackboard system inviting students to participate in group interviews, and those participants that indicated that they were interested in participating in these group interviews attended the sessions. Fusch and Ness (2015) posit that the number of responses in qualitative research is determined when data saturation is researched. Data saturation is achieved when there is enough information to replicate the study, when the ability to obtain new information has been reached, and when further coding is no longer feasible. However, data saturation must fit the qualitative research design, which depends on the sample size of the population. Researchers should aim for rich and thick data – rich in terms of quality and thick in terms of quantity. Rich data is layered, intricate, detailed and nuanced. Data saturation is not about numbers, but about the depth of the data. Due to the total number of participants and the broad range of ages, years of study and the opportunity for participants to answer as extensively as possible, both rich and thick data were gathered from the group interviews. Elo *et al.* (2014:8) state that the trustworthiness of content analysis depends on the availability of rich, appropriate and well-saturated data. Trustworthiness also depends on the way the data is collected.

3.2 Research analysis

This study used an explorative design, working through text with an inductively formulated category system, and it utilised the Mayring (2014:80) inductive content analysis procedural model (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Steps of inductive category management (Source: Mayring, 2014:80)



Step 1 – Research questions. Formulate a clear research question, not just a topic or a title. The research question must fit an inductive logic, which means it must be explorative. The aim of this study is to evaluate students' experience as actors within a higher education system. The theoretical background must be described using literature and previous studies. This section of the study is covered in the literature review section.

Step 2 – Category definition and level of abstraction. The category definition must be explicit and serves as a selection criterion to determine the relevant material from the texts. The level of abstraction defines how specific or general categories must be formulated, which is central to inductive category formation. For the purpose of this study, the areas of exploration were operationalised into category definitions. These are; the students' learning experience, the students experience of using technology, the students experience of their home department, the students experience of service departments and the students' experience of the HEI's physical location in a major city. Step 2 is covered in the introduction, the literature review and the respondents' feedback from the group interview. This group interview transcriptions served as the unit of the analysis.

Step 3 – Coding the text. Qualitative data coding decisions should be based on the paradigm and the theoretical approach of the study. The following coding methods were chosen for the data analysis. Attribute Coding was used to log essential descriptive information of the participants. In order to tap into the students' experience, In-Vivo Coding was used to honor the participants' voice and to ground the data analysis from their perspective. In-Vivo Coding is also very effective to develop new theories. Emotion Coding tap into the participants inner cognitive systems. Emotion Coding was used to label the feelings that the participants' have experienced and used the list of six main emotions as provided by www.englishstudyhere.com (Saldana 2009). Steps 3 to 7 were done on the transcriptions, each time improving on the previous step.

Step 4 – Revision. A revision in the sense of a pilot loop is necessary, when the category system seems to become stable. Check if the category system fits the research question. If it does not, a revision of the category definition is necessary. Check if the degree of generalisation is sufficient. If there are only a few categories, then the level of abstraction is too general. If there are many categories, then the level of abstraction is too specific.

Step 5 – Final coding. The whole material, in this case the transcriptions, has to be worked through with the same rules – that is, category definition and level of abstraction.

Step 6 – At the end of this process, you have a list of categories. Group them together and build themes, keeping in-line with the research question.

Step 7 – Intra- or inter-coder check. Start coding the text from the beginning. Code text to categories.

Step 8 – Findings. The findings are at first the list of categories. If categories had to be found regarding several text passages, 4 transcripts as in this study, a frequency analysis of the categories' occurrence could be useful. The categories and the frequencies must be interpreted in the direction of the research aim. Step 8 revealed the findings of this study and is presented below.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

All group interviews were done on one campus and were facilitated by an independent research agency. The findings have been analysed from the answers provided from focus group interviews and were formulated to reflect the main themes that emerged. Participants were anonymised apart from the details as per the Attribute Coding in Table 1 and therefore, direct quotations will be distinguished by referring to the groups as G1 to G4. Attribute coding is the notation, usually in the beginning of a set of data, of the basic descriptive information of the participants. Attribute coding provides essential information and sets the context for analysis and interpretation (Saldana 2009).

Table 1: Details of the participants

Group interview number	Number of participants	M / F	Ages of participants	Year of study
G1	3	2 / 1	21 / 20 / 20	2 / 3 / 2
G2	5	4 / 1	21 / 19 / 19 / 22 / 22	3 / 1 / 2 / 2 / 3
G3	5	1 / 4	20 / 30 / 23 / 22 / 21	3 / 3 / 2 / 3 / 3
G4	11	3 / 8	22 / 23 / 22 / 21 / 22 / 20 / 20 / 21 / 21 / 22 / 20	3 / 3 / 1 / 2 / 1 / 3 / 3 / 3 / 3 / 3 / 2

The respondents were 42% male and 58% female. This reflects the South African population which stipulates that there are more females (52%) than males (Evans, 2018). All the participants are between 19 and 23 and the majority (58%) are in their third year of study. It can be argued that the third-year students have more experience as actors within this people intensive delivery system and therefore will provide valuable rich data.

When participants were asked to explain their learning experience, one dominant theme emerged. The participants were initially overwhelmed but, as they articulate in levels, the learning experience seems to get easier.

"It's something that I am not used to, I would say it is somewhat a more advanced learning" G2
"But as time went on I got used to it and it has become like a success because I have improved" G1

This finding ties in with the notion that South African universities are responsible for more than only educating students on knowledge. Students feel overwhelmed at the start of their student career. Universities should therefore appreciate their roles as more than only knowledge providers, but as holistic service providers, and constituents of society (Dell, 2018; Strydom, 2016). Universities should help students to adapt to their new environment and should provide continued support throughout the process. As students indicate that their experience and performance improved over time, it proposes that the university has succeeded to a certain extent in supporting the student adequately as they have progressed through the system.

On an emotional level the participants' learning experience can be described as energizing and confusing. Part of this feeling of confusion, to a lesser extent, included aspects such as the initial stress of the new environment, pressures from parents and/or others, language barriers, searching for friends/making a friend, new cultures and backgrounds, working with very tight assessment deadlines and often schedules in short time frames.

"So my learning experience was surreal, like a rude awakening in my first official year" G3
"It was extremely different from high school, I don't think they prepare us enough for that" G3

Students face numerous external pressures, yet they feel excited by the new chapters and experiences in their lives. Yet again, as the literature suggests, universities should position themselves in taking a constituent of society role, and not only an educator role (Strydom, 2016). Students feeling overwhelmed in their first year has been well documented in the literature (Bojuwoye, 2002; Zulu, 2008; Beyers & Joubert; 2016) and these findings suggest that this remains a critical part of the student university experience and a key driver to the students' future success. This phase of the student career is also characterized by low pass rates (Horn & Jansen, 2008; Marais & Gamow, 2009; Mabope & Meyer; 2014) and therefore remains an imperative part in the student experience and success at university.

On the issue of using Blackboard, an interface software platform between student and lecturers, the participants were very enthusiastic and lorded many praises for the system. The dominant themes picked up here were that Blackboard is convenient and advanced and the participants prefer that Blackboard is used in the context of learning. Some of the participants even said more content should be placed on Blackboard and not only material such as Power Point slides.

"It's convenient because you can get all the information in one place" G1

"It's a good thing that the technology is advanced...the times we are living in are all about technology" G2

The emotional coding revealed "energized" as the most dominant theme.

"My experience is that Blackboard is one of the most amazing things I've ever seen" G 1

Previous studies suggest that lecturers tend to perceive Blackboard as more of a communication system rather than a learning system (Kleinveldt, Schutte & Stilwell, 2016) and that there is a need from students for the provision of more quality of the content provided on the platform (Tella, 2012). This might explain students' needs in recommending that even more learning material should be placed on Blackboard.

On exploring the participants' experience of their home department, the findings are overwhelmingly positive. With a few exceptions here and there, most participants felt like their home department is helpful and welcoming.

"If you go to the department you get what you need...even if the lecturer is not there a substitute will be there, always someone you can go to, so far so good" G4

"Going to my department is always a good experience" G1

Another issue that was raised with the experience of home departments was that of lecturer consultation. The participants value the consultation process at the home department. This is where they get to meet other staff members and the tutors.

"When I started consulting, I knew where my department was, and the lecturers and tutors are good" G1

"From my experience I would say they are friendly with me and also in terms of consulting you get whatever you need" G2

Most of the participants experience happiness when dealing with their respective home departments. See comment directly above.

Lecturers fulfill numerous roles; Firstly, they are educators, followed by researchers and learners themselves who not only share their research knowledge with their students, but also teach students critical and reflective thinking. Lastly, and very importantly, lecturers are also motivators and supporters, and should view their role as being important facilitators and/or mediators of the learning experience (McGie, 2008). Students clearly appreciate consulting, with both lecturers and tutors, as a form of engagement and learning mediation. Lecturers should therefore embrace this role and function of the learning process.

When the students were asked to give feedback on their experience of service departments, the findings were overall negative. The service departments referred to are the finance department, faculty officers, intercampus busses, the registration process and the student centers. The participants are of the opinion that they are not being helped, are uncomfortable visiting there and often leave such a visit very frustrated.

"When you go to the faculty the lady gives you attitude over and above your frustrations" G4

On the issue of finances, most of the participants are unclear about their finances, especially those students who get bursaries from the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS).

"Right now I have no idea where I stand with the varsity administration, especially when it comes to finance" G3

"Finance department is worse than a horror" G2

Exploring the issues of the inter campus bus services, the participants felt that there are peak bus times, where more busses should be employed, but overall the system is acceptable.

"...there are peak hours...Fridays there are long ques" G1

On the issue of the students' experience of the student center, the sentiment was generally positive. The students feel that the student center where the cafeteria is housed is user friendly, and everybody is welcome. This was also deemed an important space for interaction and getting to meet new people.

"I think they cater for everyone irrespective of colour" G3

Emotionally the participants experience anger when dealing with the faculty as a service department. The following words came up when the interviewer asked the participants to describe their faculty officers.

"Anger, arrogant, ignorant, old-minded" G1

Due to the government funding provided to a few students to improve access to education (Dell, 2018), it is possible that there are larger numbers of students in need of support in terms of financial queries (more compared to the past). Additional pressures are therefore possibly experienced on these systems (receiving more student queries than usual), which could be a possible cause of bad student experiences at these departments. University enrolments are also growing rapidly (Mabelebele, 2015; Mushemeza, 2016; Malele, 2011). Service departments are responsible for servicing all students in a faculty, not just a specific segment of students (as is the case of a home department). It may therefore, like the finance departments, be possible that the student numbers are placing pressures on these systems, potentially resulting in overworked service department staff that start to lose compassion with student problems as they are exposed to so many student queries in a day. The same argument may also be made to excessive queues and waiting periods with bus services; there is an increase in student demand, with university systems unable to keep up with these. These are challenging times for universities, because there are not necessarily budgets available to provide this additional support – South African government pushes universities to increase their student enrolments, but university funding is provided at increases below the country's inflation rate (Hornsby, 2015).

Regarding the students' experience of the HEI's physical location in a major city, the students felt that the crime in Johannesburg is a deterrent and they are always aware of their surroundings.

"You are robbed here" G2

"You are always cautious" G2

However, putting the security issues aside, most of the participants felt that Johannesburg is a "nice" place to live in and very accessible.

"The place itself is very nice" G1

"It makes a lot of things accessible because when you get to town you just use the bus, you don't have to worry about taxi fees. The shopping centers as well" G1

On an emotional level, the participants felt happy when asked about the physical location of the HEI.

"I think because we are based in the inner city it is much simpler for us to inter-connect with other people and move around in the city" G3

In summary, the feedback received in general reflect a positive attitude. The participants valued their learning experience and their experience of technology assisted learning was also positive. The participants felt empowered, happy and energized on both these areas of exploration. The participants also felt happy in their dealing with their respective home departments and even want this to expand. This can be seen in the positive feedback received on the issue of consultation at the home department. With regards to the HEI's location within a major city, caution and happiness was expressed. It is important to note that four out of the five areas that were explored came out "happy" on the emotional experience chart. The only bad experience the participants had was dealing with the service department. This made them uncomfortable and created frustration.

5. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Students have adaptation problems articulating from their high schools into a higher education institution. The learning curve increase is a major problem for students. Managers and staff need to be cognizant of this and provide additional support to first-year students. There are many forms that this support can take for example, a lesser workload for the students, managing assessment time better and more lecturing periods and workshops on how to adapt to university life. The use of Blackboard as an interface system should be kept and even increased. Lecturers should be encouraged to specifically focus on providing more quality content on Blackboard and move away from perceiving it as a predominant communication tool, but rather an overall learning tool. Consultation times at home departments can be increased as students relish visiting there. Consulting with the lecturer is an important form of additional learning to the students. The university needs to take a closer look at their faculty officers and how the finance department interacts with students. As discussed, the growing numbers of students may be placing pressure on these particular functions, and the university will have to re-look the functioning and activities as well as funding allocations and possibly increase staff numbers at these departments in an effort to improve the student experience.

It was also evident that students are uncertain about certain policies and procedures which places additional stress and queries on service departments. Innovative short videos or slides explaining university systems and policies, especially regarding marks, finances, pass rates and academic codes that are placed on blackboard for students to view, and therefore better educate them, may also relieve some unnecessary student visits to service departments. Lastly, Universities in South Africa needs to appreciate their roles as not only knowledge providers and educators, but important contributors to societies. Given the socio-economic nature of the country and its challenges, universities cannot afford to function in a mindset of only providing knowledge and education. Its responsibilities reach much further in terms of molding responsible citizens. Compulsory student workshops focusing on, for example, different life skills, values, ethics, job hunting and CV writing and personal financial management should all be considered in fulfilling this holistic role.

6. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study was conducted at one major university in an important economic city in South Africa. The results can therefore not be generalised. In taking a service design and systems theory approach in this paper, the student was placed at the centre of the process and evaluated in isolation as a component of the larger system to understand the needs and challenges of this important element in the service system. In order to continue the need for understanding the holistic system and how the different stakeholders further co-create the service experience, further research may be conducted on specifically the service staff's experience at this institution, in order to gain their perspective and to match and solve the tension points between the engagements taking place. As the participants view the departments in such a good light, further research could also explore the view of the home departments as service providers and their roles in the student's education experience and service needs. It is also encouraged that researchers from other South African institutions undertake similar studies, in order to identify overall themes pertaining to institutions of higher education in South Africa.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The paper aimed to uncover students' problems and challenges in a South African context and to review possibilities for improvement. This was done by evaluating undergraduate students' experience as actors in an intensive university service delivery system. The specific objectives included to explore

a) *Undergraduate students' experience of studying at a higher education institution*; the findings suggested that despite many times, because of bad press and student riots, one would think that the students experience the university system as wanting. This paper proved quite the contradiction – students are generally happy. b) *Undergraduate students' emotions experienced as actors within a university system*; similar to previous literature, students seemed most distressed at the start of their academic career and experience emotions of feeling overwhelmed and confused. Continued support should therefore be provided during the first year. These feelings later turn into stronger confidence and feelings of achievement and growth. c) *Potential service gaps in students' experiences as key service receivers in a*

university system; the study revealed that service departments, such as the finance departments and faculty, were the largest sections in the system that caused student frustrations and negative emotions.

8. ETHICAL CLEARANCE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The proper ethical procedure was followed as per the university structures and policies and an ethical clearance certificate was issued for this study.

The researchers would also like to acknowledge the university's role and contribution in providing funding to conduct this research.

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